

18: Kes, The Camel-Necked Needler

At the Party Camp, Jenk-Fa was waiting for Kes, with Kier by him. "I want you in the tent. Kier will take Hamel."

He'd been expecting to have to account for his actions back at the Swamp.

Jenk closed the tent-flap after him.

Kuri-Mah started straight into it. "Sit down, son. I'll be interested to hear your version of your troubles some other time."

Huh? For a couple of seconds Kes didn't hear what Kuri-Mah bumbled on with. "... Your first time in the dome," she ended.

"What?" he said.

"I said, since we don't need the credits to buy that girl, we've organised for you to have your first party night this Circle."

"Why?"

"A favour to me," Jenk said from behind him.

Kes shuffled round to be facing them both equally. "Are you giving me this because you think I'll be so hopeless at the Fighting, I'll get killed the first time in the ring? So that otherwise I won't get a turn in the dome?"

For a change it was Kuri-Mah frowning like thunder and Jenk-Fa inscrutable. "I guess you think I'll be all right," Kes said. "Not a total idiot." He gestured with his hands to placate. Kuri still frowned. Jenk still stared without expression. "Stuff it. Whatever." He shrugged.

"We merely thought to let you experience beforehand what you'll be Fighting for," Kuri said.

"Since you seem to need convincing," Jenk said. His father looked different.

"After the Fighting that earns the winter grazing, you mean?" Kes said to mark time, to try and work it out. "You've oiled your tattoo? Just for anchoring the camp? That is why you've got time for this?"

"So many questions," Kuri said. "And always they are pointed. Yes, we drew the short straw. So yes, we are anchoring while everyone else goes partying."

"I went to see a man about my middle son," Jenk said. "The dome boss. To sign you in. He's also the artist to inked me. I wanted his handiwork to look its best." Jenk was of the horse totem and had the top half of a mare's face marked out over his head.

Kuri laughed as if in relief. "Remember jenk, when the kids were convinced you could see out of the mare's eyes? The kids were a lot easier to manage in those days."

Blood rushed to Kes's face, or he might as well say that he blushed. For years, Jenk's tattooed eyes on the side of his face were what kept Kes and Kier from fighting. His mother's tattoo was something else. Her eyes were outlined with eagle's eye hollows. And the two halves of an eagle's beak covered her nose and mouth.

She seemed to read his mind. "Will your SkinGifter girl still love you when you have your tattoo? The same as my partner loves my eagle face?"

Right then he decided on a different design for himself. For whatever future he'd end up with.

"You'd better get going," Kuri-Mah said. "People will be dropping off their kiddies soon." She passed him a credit bracelet. Gestured with her head. "Out the back flap. Jeldie and Lewit are out there waiting for you."

Jeb peeled out of the shadows after only a few camel-lengths, and Kes dropped back from between Lewit and Jeldie, forcing Jeb to flank him. Lewit rode in front of Jeb, with Jeldie in front of Kes.

As they neared the dome, already big and black against the horizon, it eclipsed the darkening velvet sky. “I can hardly believe we’re so early that they haven’t even switched the lights on?” Lewit said.

The words hardly out of his mouth when coloured lights sparked into life, in a carefully planned random order, until the dome was outlined and striated with rays coming from an artificial sunrise over the centre of the roof. There were even lights on the ground, pulsing toward a place against the dome wall where to tie up their beasts.

Kes and Lewit bumbled around keeping Jeb to Kes’s right and Jeldie to Lewit’s left, to deflect Jeb’s subtle ongoing cruelty toward his sister. *Like father, like son.* Which was how they entered the dome through the wide doorway.

Everything Kes knew about the dome was courtesy of Kyle, who had been telling his dome stories for a couple of years. The Harmony Arch would be first and the best value for his credit as it was free, because you had to walk under it to get into the dome proper. More tunnel than arch, he saw now, and more an airy structure of light-beams than a built thing.

All four of them got their best feet forward onto the sensory mats at the same time. Immediately the light flickering inside the arch coalesced and became three *pairs* of coloured ribbons twirling on ahead of them!

Kes held back. He wanted to see what the others did before he committed himself. What he’d heard about it was that the arch was *magic*.

With Jeb alongside, also holding back, Kes studied Jeldie’s and Lewit’s pair of ribbons—so obviously them due to the almost-same colours. Maroon and red. These twirled round each other and looped Jeldie and Lewit together by their necks and shoulders, tightening until they kissed, and dancing them together thereafter. As they came to the end of the arch, they were holding hands Kes noticed, while the twin ribbons skipped out front and with a final flourish became invisible.

Jeb morosely shifted his gaze to the mauve band shyly tweaking at the dark green one waving solidly out front of him. “Who do you think it means by the mauve?” he said.

Kes’s attention stayed with the ribbands appearing seemingly out of the air right in front of him. “Lyris,” he said, recalling a wistful glance toward Jeb.

“So where is she?” Jeb said.

“Back at camp probably. Because is she even old enough to get in?” Kes said to get Jeb out of his face.

Jeb fell back.

The sun-green current must be Ahni. His brown kestrel-winged ribbon, and her sea-stream, twisted around one another and separated briefly before coming back together again. Toward the end of the arch—which he reached too soon—their ribbons braided together too tightly to unravel. Hot joy flushed through him. *Ahni and I aren’t anywhere near finished!*

Then he stepped from under the archway. His heart lurched as his and Ahni’s ribbons cleared, making it like it showed the end of their time.

Apart from the arch there was only one place he was interested to see. Not the painted sky of dark blue without the shadows of clouds or the tint of star glow. Holo galaxies hung low, their stars clustered too close. A twirling silver ball only occasionally moon-like hung in the wrong quarter.

Not the booths that lined both sides of the supposed street. Each with its own robo-spruiker and all of them attempting to outdo all the others shouting their specialities. Colour, sound, bits and bytes whirled like sand assaulting him. Like the kind of storm that when you opened your eyes, you'd fall over from no horizon.

Jeldie laughed at him staggering. "Isn't it great? It's much more fun than anyone ever told!" she pulled Kes to the nearest booth. A clownhead on a pedestal spouted his words from his open mouth. "Ware. Ware. Beware blood-wares!" The open mouthed head twisted from side to side in time to Lewis jumping from side to side on the sensory mat in the front of the booth.

"It knows you're here?" Kes said.

"Duh, Kes," Lewit said. "It senses my moves. You want to check out the product?" Lewit thrust his arm up to and including a Kuri-family credit bracelet around his bicep, down the clown's gullet. A dark screen in front of them lit up with Lewit's shape in bones and muscles and blood-vessels.

Jeldie worked a keyboard on the wall beside the screen until silver blood ran in Lewit's blood-vessels. "And at the next place you can have your bones made longer or shorter. You wanna see what you would look like taller than Kier?"

"Show me something real," Kes said. When he started down the street, Jeldie ran to overtake him, and stopped at a place that had a skeleton jangling at the entry.

This time Jeldie stuck her arm down the spruiker's gullet for it to extract credit. She wore a Kuri-family bracelet, too. "See where I broke my leg?" "If I wanted to spend my hard-earned credits, I could have that join smoothed."

"Did you just pay Kuri-family credits to show me a pic of your bones?"

"To give you a good time ... as how you need to be ..."

Boom. Boom. Boom. A booming technotic rhythm swallowed up the rest of Jeldie's answer.

"That's the trancery starting up," said Lewit. "Let's go." He and Jeldie each took Kes by an arm and steered him toward the pulsing glow at the end of the lane.

Kes held back, feet flat on the floor. No way did he want to be taken around by a pair of someones paid to make sure he had a good time. What were his parents thinking? "Wait. I've got a couple of things I want to do Kyle told me about. I'll join you in there when I'm done." If he wanted to dance at all by then.

"Sure?" Lewit said, hardly stopping.

"Don't worry. Kyle told me good."

"Let's go, Lewit." Jeldie pulled Lewit away.

Kes watched them into the throbbing doorway and then steered toward the left of the trancery entry, where the barely visible holo of a tattooed man paraded the few metres of frontage. Up and down. Up and down.

A sign over the door. *The Dome Boss is In.* The foyer was clearly a gallery of 3D shots of the booth's work. Jenk's mug was not on show. Kes cleared his throat.

"Come in," said a probably human, probably male voice.

Beyond the electronic curtain, a man sat behind a table inlaid with technotics. His head was as blank and smooth as a river-stone apart from his facial features. He wore a white singlet that showed off his arms and chest covered with dozens of tattooed icons set in a leopard-spot matrix.

“This the tattoo booth?” Kes said.

“It is and it isn’t.” The man’s eyes were a startling staring blue. “Depends on who is asking. Put your thumb on that scanner and I’ll tell you.”

Kes pressed his thumb on a scan unit in the nearest corner of the table.

One of the technotics went berserk. He heard bells, whistles and possibly even a bull camel’s roar. *Huh?*

“You are Kestrel. Son of Jenk of the Horse Totem and Kuri of the Raptor Clan.”

Kes blew out his pent-up breath. “Did you do their tats? That’s what I’m here for too.”

“That’s not what Jenk organised with me.”

Kes slipped the credit bracelet from his arm and laid it on the table in front of the man. “I’m not spending it on anything else. If I wait, they’ll force the traditional one on me.”

“And that’s bad?”

He didn’t want to explain how you had to have your mask for a year before you could even begin to think about your totem markings. And that he’d refused the mask and was still refusing it. How he was still in limbo as a result. He glanced at the technotics on the table, the moving displays in particular. “That’s the Harmony Arch! With Moss and Kyle about to walk into it!”

“A bit late off the blocks, those two,” the dome-boss said cryptically.

“Probably they had to clean themselves up some after the shooting. The crocs—you know—where we cross the river. The mud.” Why was he even telling the joker?

The joker’s fingers danced over his keyboard. “Let me see ... Guess I’ll do them some fireworks.”

On the table, the image of Kyle and Moss in the Harmony Arch enlarged while all the others shrank down into the corners. Fireworks fizzed between Moss and Kes’s brother. Kes froze and blushed by turns remembering how he’d believed Kyle telling him about the magic of the Harmony Arch.

“I’m Egg, by the way. Commonly known as.” The man commonly known as Egg stuck his hand over the table for Kes to shake it. “Don’t look so disappointed. This whole dome is about Hell City fleecing its customers. What I was once. See how they fleeced me?” He ran a hand over his naked head.

“I suppose my father told you the details.” Kes couldn’t help himself sounding stilted.

“Your father is a romantic. But what are you? Don’t tell me.” Egg raised his hand to ward off Kes’s explanation if he so felt like it. “You are a work in progress.” Egg said. “So take these paints, and mark your ideas up on your reflection. To show me what you have in mind. Mirror through there.” He passed over a slide box of oily colour sticks and motioned Kes through another electronically-curtained doorway.

Where Kes found a robo-chair with its containment straps hanging loose, and looking like a disused seat of torture. A camel-necked machine, with teeth like needles, stood beside the chair. He quaked. He should’ve asked Jenk how it was done. Prepared himself.

His whole body suddenly was slick with sweat—probably his plans were too big again. How? When did anyone ever figure themselves out well enough not to make a fool of themselves. He sweated so much that probably when he shifted his feet, he'd leave wet footprints on the floor. The colour sticks just about slid from his sweat-dripping fingers.

“Just look at the mirror for now,” Egg said as if he knew exactly what Kes did. Egg probably had a display of Kes right in front of him on the table.

The whole wall lit up when Kes with a red face went to stand in front of it. Reflections of dozens of the room stretched behind him, with at least that many chairs.

“Outline yourself and mark in your design,” Egg said from the other room.

Kes breathed deep. *Ignore the chair. Ignore the man. This is for my future.* He'd be making a life-long commitment. Not just to the tattoo, but also to being what it would say about him. He outlined himself on the mirror, then drew a star on his own chest. Studied how it looked. Duplicated it on the mirror. Filled the reflection with silver.

He yellowed his flesh-and-blood forefingers and drew them down his flesh-and-blood smile-grooves to signify a kestrel's beak-hinges, to get them exactly right, then traced them onto his reflection.

With two fingers, first with his right hand, then his left, he printed brown feathers all the way down his arms to signify a kestrel's wings. Duplicated them on his mirror image with thick crayon strokes. Finally, he made the backs of all his fingers black for the wingtips.

Egg came in and studied the mirror side by side with Kes.

Kes recalled the result of Kyle's first tattoo session last year. How Kyle had been when he got back—silent—and with only one mingy feather after all the bragging beforehand. “It's too much, isn't it?”

Egg took off his singlet. The leopard design continued around his torso and probably further. “No design is too much until you run out of places to put it. It's just too much for one session. Where do you want to begin?”

“The beak-hinges and the star,” Kes said.

“I'll do the star this session, but I've got to tell you what I tell everyone who wants silver.”

“What?”

“That ink comes from the delta. It starts off white. Often it'll take a couple of weeks, once even a year, to make up its mind. Then it either becomes silver or it turns black. If there is any science to it, I don't know it. So most people decide not to have it. I can do your star in yellow, to signify gold.”

The idea of silver had felt so right. “I'll give the silver a go.”

Egg smiled. “Then let's get needling.” He indicated the chair.

Kes sat on its edge and swung his feet up. He laughed as the chair shuddered him into itself and adjusted to itself to his shape and weight. “As good as a ride.”

Then the chair flung its straps around him and drew them tight. He was trussed and without being able to move a finger.

“Some people call it quits right there,” Egg said. “They don't like the constraints. Still with me?”

“Tell it I want to breather and I'll get used to it.”

Egg pulled over the camel-necked needler and punched its button display. He rolled a stool from behind the chair, for him to sit on. “The mirror is a scan unit and sends the design to the needler. It’ll be the exact replica.”

“Will you even be guiding the needler?” Kes said. “Because how are you an artist when all what you are doing is programming?”

“Who says I am? Your father, I suppose?”

The needler descended and made contact. Kes gasped. Egg burred on about needle-depths on his skin. Kes listened, stupified by his shuddering breathing.

“There’s pain and pain, young kestrel. Breathe steady and breathe deep. Concentrate on your star. The needler is an extension of my hand and of my brain. Breathe deep.”